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ABSTRACT

Centered on specific definitions of ombudsman and learning center, the use of the college learning center director as an academic ombudsman is explored. In particular, this proposed relationship is based on the learning center's special concern with facilitating student learning and, as such, on becoming an intercessory for clients with academic grievances. The campus ombudsman primarily receives students' complaints, effecting solutions for legitimate grievances. Good learning centers provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their academic career. Concern with academic survival and association with high-risk students, innovative educational media, and personnel concerned with innovative educational techniques have made the learning center staff ad hoc academic ombudsmen. Learning center personnel are essentially pragmatic and want to help students improve basic skills. Because of their functional role in the campus organization, learning centers become refuges for high-risk and usually disadvantaged students. This student group usually has the greatest number of problems. Current education is highly hardware/software-oriented. Appropriate use of these tools and techniques is best directed by learning center staff. As a result, the learning center staff seem more appropriate as academic ombudsmen than deans of students or departmental deans. (Author/AL)

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El Camino College

An Address Delivered at the
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of
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After defining the terms ombudsman and learning center, this paper shall explain how the college learning center finds itself in a position to serve as academic ombudsman, especially in the larger institutional setting. Further, the paper shall demonstrate that because of the learning center's special concern with facilitating student learning, it has become intercessory for clients with academic grievances.

The Campus Ombudsman

The 150-year-old Swedish concept of the ombudsman materialized on American campuses in 1967, perhaps as partial remedy for problems generated by the largeness and bureaucratic impersonalism of colleges and universities. (9: 113) Just as bureaucracy is a necessary concomitant of size, so is an ombudsman a necessary intermediary in multiversities that become so complex that students become lonely, lost, and alienated. (21: 80)

Although it was the college president who first seized the idea and chose to appoint an ombudsman as his confidential aide and as a troubleshooting adviser who would handle minor grievances, more lately the office of ombudsman has become the special concern of students* who find themselves powerless when wronged or ignored by the system. (21) Aware that the "full scope and variety of student problems cannot be anticipated by the institution" (19: 442) and concerned that the "procedures for instituting change and for settling student grievances do not even respect the rights guaranteed in civil courts," (15: 23) students have sought an agent who possesses an "awareness of the individual and the problems of the bureaucracy." (22: 1)

The definition that proceeds from these demands is interesting. The campus ombudsman becomes that person who receives complaints primarily from students (18: 38) who come with "personal problems whose solution does not jeopardize the future of the university." (16: 364) His assignment is to effect the solution of legitimate grievances solely through noncoercive strategies of inquiry, negotiation, and persuasion. (3: 54) (12: 37) (13: 120) However, London affirms that "if he does no more than listen, the ombudsman performs an invaluable service for the university." (16: 364)

The College Learning Center

Learning centers also respond to unresolved student difficulties. Sensitive to the academic unpreparedness of students, to the impersonalism and complexity of large-class instruction, to perfunctory computer grading, to abusive applications of educational media, and to the special arrogance of professors who think of any troubled student as merely a nuisance (6), student/learner-oriented learning centers have emerged at an accelerated rate since 1967. Typically, the centers

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*Indicative of student interest in the subject is the fact that the Associated Students of El Camino College sponsored this paper's presentation by underwriting one-half of participation expenses and by resourcefully obtaining matching funds from the college administration.

are designed to diagnose and treat clients' deficiencies in reading/study skills, to sharpen students' test-taking techniques, to sensitize their academic etiquette, and otherwise prepare academically inept clients to survive in college. (1) (2) (5) (10) (11) (14) (24) Such centers attempt to provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their academic career.

Although individual learning centers are likely to develop personalities colored by the ecology within which they flourish, Christ, having reviewed the evolution of such centers, describes five functions typically carried on by them:

1) as a place where a learner gets tutorial help;
2) as a referral agency to other helping agencies such as medical, psychological, and spiritual;
3) as a library of basic study aids in the content field;
4) as a training facility for paraprofessionals, peer counselors and tutors;
5) as an information clearing house to update faculty in latest learning research and methodologies. (5: 35)

The Ombudsman in the Learning Center

Hultgren (10), however, has strongly suggested that yet another function is germane to the thrust of the learning center. He mentions the "adoption of a document called 'Students Rights and Freedoms,' which guides the relations of all members of the academic community in their relations with students." (10: 92) He sees one learning center function as that of facilitating student voice in areas that deeply influence his academic effectiveness. He further sees this academic effectiveness threatened unless an agent is drafted to guide, to provide counsel, and even to intercede for students who complain about members of the faculty and their pedagogical tactics.

It is in this area of what Rowland has identified as purely academic grievances (19: 444) that the learning center director has found himself, sometimes reluctantly, working to achieve justice or at least accommodation for students. In fact, it is because of their direct concerns and association with academic survival, with the high-

risk student, with innovative educational media, and, finally, with personnel that are ever-curious about searching eclectically for answers to educational puzzles that learning centers have become residences for an ad hoc academic ombudsman.

Academic Survival

The typical learning center director and his staff have relinquished any hold they may have had on the academic dream: that the process of getting a degree and clearing the curricular hurdles is necessarily an enlightening, valuable, humanizing process that produces better, happier citizens. Rather, using a systems approach to reading/study skills attainment, the learning practitioner concentrates on helping students stay in the academic race, while taking no ethical position on the real or fancied virtues of degreesmanship. His interests become essentially pragmatic: helping students to improve their reading, writing, listening, notetaking, test-taking skills -- the grade-getting survival skills -- so that they can endure a curriculum that is sometimes calculatedly intimidating and is usually obsolete. Further, while carrying on this process of redirection and behavior modification, he finds himself in sympathy with and champion for the student who has been victimized by what Linowitz calls "bad teaching" -- "both what is taught and how it is taught." (15: 20) Linowitz becomes more explicit: "Some instructors present the material, grade papers, and treat students in ways that are seen to be incompetent, offensive or unfair." (15: 20)

Given the painful realities of the curricular system, the learning center person cannot help notice that there is need for someone to serve as counselor for the academically unclever student, then as a procurer of tutors or peer counselors for students needing peer instruction or guidance, and, finally, if all other strategies fail, as agent for a client whose professor is suspicious of students who enjoy a state of mind that he cannot share. Commonly, learning center personnel are asked to serve as interpreters for an instructor who possesses the gift of being able to say things so that they can be

understood in various ways -- until the day of the test. Or they are asked to decipher cryptic and sometimes misleading editorial hieroglyphics appended to a composition and then to counsel the student who would improve his writing and hopefully his grade. They are implored to help students read and ingest the content of texts whose reading levels, according to Hagstrom, are commonly years beyond their readers. (8: 68) Likewise, they are asked to prepare students for test items that are educationally suspect or unmitigatedly ambiguous. Finally, they are asked to intercede for a student whose perishable ego is threatened when confronted with the utter curmudgeonliness of the professor who is fatalistically but comfortably committed to the respectability of the curve or to building an empire in which students are regarded as serfs.

In a singular position to see these factors operating in the academic ecology, the learning center director, if he is at all human, will find that he can hardly avoid serving as ombudsman.

The High-Risk Student

Perhaps because they are more approachable or because other agencies in the system will seldom tolerate such programs or clients, learning centers have become the refuge for high-risk students, especially those students who are classified as "disadvantaged." Therefore, the director will find himself characteristically in charge of federally and state funded, acronymically identifiable "remedial" and "developmental" programs, such as EOP, OEO, VEA, and other programs that traffic principally in black and chicano populations.

"Almost without exception," states Moore, "disadvantaged students are students with a staggering number of problems." (17: 56) Besides the obvious ethnolinguistic difficulties, these students have a host of other problems involving economics, study environment, family harmony, and other limitations demanding institutional social work if more than a trifling percentage of them are to survive. Further, they are not prepared to cope with deadlines, waiting lines, fees, forms, and the whole array of official bureaucratic ritual that is part of the academic structure. Finally, the vast majority of

disadvantaged students are slow learners (17: 58) and as such are inevitably in need of special counseling, often in need of individual tutoring, and, especially are in need of an ombudsman who will listen to their problems and translate them to those who need to share that understanding.

Educational Media

In order to reach the marginal, disadvantaged student, today's learning center uses specially trained and qualified personnel, unique hardware, exhaustive and innovative tutoring programs, and constantly re-evaluated materials in order to perform the miracle of beating the system. (17: 225) Committed to a systems approach to learning, the learning center person understandably becomes apologist for and exemplary practitioner in the art (and science) of matching the most effective media with the diagnosed needs of a client. Therefore, he does not view the computer as a souped-up adding machine; rather, he is inclined to champion the liberating aspects of technology especially as he provides a client with effective learning alternatives.

While introducing clients to innovative media that will help them survive in the system, the practitioner is serving a primary function as ombudsman. Further, while introducing his colleagues to more sophisticated diagnoses and treatment than is customarily implemented by them (17: 188), he eventually manages to obtain more direct help for the student who otherwise would flounder in the pool of academic confusion.

Yet another ombudsman function grows out of the technological area: that of technological ombudsman. (23: 440-442) Whatever the long-term salutary effects of educational media, some of the immediate applications have been mindless and abusive, for enthusiastic but uninformed educators have installed expensive but sometimes inefficient hardware and software in the hope that students would be served. Again, sometimes faculty have purchased materials whose advertising claimed nonexistent virtues, and students have been expected to learn from such materials. It is, then, in a protective function that a

learning center director may serve as resource person and as a consultant so that media applications are not disillusioning to students and faculty.

The Learning Center Staff

Before one looks to learning center personnel to function as academic ombudsmen, he wonders whether at least two other functionaries in the collegiate structure might not be suited for the job, namely, the dean of students or the departmental dean. But, as Capuzzi indicates, the dean of students, being a member of the student personnel services, is typically not sufficiently trained to help a client whose difficulties are clearly scholastic. (4: 191) Again, the departmental dean is usually divorced from the more practical considerations of instructional lag; also, he is liable to be over-protective of prevailing instructional practices and of faculty, especially faculty whom he has been instrumental in hiring and retaining. In fact, as one investigates alternative homes for the ombudsman, he is struck with the paradox that most educational executives want innovation but without change. Moreover, he is faced with the probability that most well-ensconced executives, faced with the radical adjustment to ombudsmanship, would experience a crisis in their self-esteem.

It should be apparent, however, that qualifications for learning center personnel and for academic ombudsmen are essentially congruent. For both positions, a personnel director would look for qualities of an academic renaissance man or certainly for traits of versatility, tolerance, and patience. Because of their Naderian postures, both positions tend to alienate their holders from their colleagues.(3: 55) Further, these offices are usually filled by persons who must be satisfied with their own expert competence and not emotional intimacy with faculty. (20: 100-101) Again, each position calls for a person who can at least empathize with the notion that the majority of students do know how they can learn best (7: 348) if only given the opportunity to exercise their talents. Finally, since requisites for both positions would seem to be a special kind of insanity that thrives on wide-ranging, emotionally charged problem solving, it would seem that these jobs merge into one. "Ombudsmaniaically" speaking, if a learning center director has half a mind to become an ombudsman, that's all he needs.

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